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A STATUE OF MARSYAS BY
PUGET

THE Museum has acquired, through purchase, a statue in white marble representing Marsyas, by the great French sculptor of the seventeenth century, Pierre Puget. The statue,¹ which measures forty-one inches in height, was formerly in the collection of Moise de Camondo and later in that of David Weill. It is exhibited this month in the Room of Recent Accessions.

To relate at length the familiar story of Marsyas and Apollo is scarcely necessary. Marsyas, it will be recalled, was a Phrygian satyr, over-confident in his skill on the oaten pipes, who rashly challenged Apollo to a musical contest and was defeated by the Olympian. In punishment for his audacity, Marsyas was bound to a tree and flayed alive.

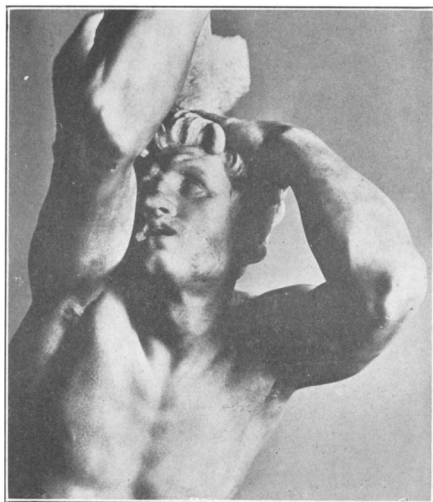
The moment which the sculptor has chosen to portray is that immediately preceding the execution of this atrocious sentence. Bound by ankle and wrist to the stump of a tree, Marsyas strains against his bonds, his beautiful, naked body in violent posture, his features distorted with frenzy. Already he feels in anticipation the cruel knife of the vengeful god, and with loud cries bewails his fate.

The art of Puget is nothing if not dramatic. It is molten lava poured from the volcano of his passions. So ardent is the sculptor that he exclaims, "The marble trembles before me," and adds, naïvely, "however large the block may be." His temperament, his artistic training, his remoteness from the court with its repres-

sion of personality, all these favored that vigorous statement of strong emotions which is conspicuously the distinguishing quality of his work.

Puget was born at Marseilles; the fiery blood of the South flowed in his veins. Italy taught him the lessons of her art and gave him employment. Seven of the happiest and most productive years of his life were spent in Genoa. When he returned to France, Colbert, the King's all-powerful

minister, could find no better employment for Puget's talents than to charge him with the decoration of the royal vessels building at Toulon. While engaged in this work, Puget vainly sought more important commissions from the King, but it was comparatively late in his career before his genius was recognized at Versailles. In the meantime he experienced the vexation of seeing large blocks of fair white marble landed on the docks at Toulon, destined



MARSYAS (DETAIL)
BY PIERRE PUGET

not for him but for the favored sculptors at Versailles. Who knows what masterpieces Puget might have produced had he had the opportunity? On the other hand, we can not entirely regret his enforced aloofness from the court. Rarely leaving Toulon after his return to his native land, Puget escaped the sterilizing influence of Le Brun. He was left free to develop a personal manner, which was, as one might expect, more closely related to the sensuous, emotional art of the Italian successors of Michelangelo, with Bernini at their head, than to the facile, impersonal style, majestic and serene, which then prevailed in France.

But Puget had other interests besides his own emotions. He delighted in representing the human body in its glorious

¹Acc. No. 19.17.

perfection, not only as beautiful in form and proportions, but so quivering with life that something of its intense vitality is communicated to the spectator and enhances his own existence. How profound was Puget's knowledge of anatomy, how fine his sensitiveness to beauty, and how instinct with life and movement his rendering of form, the Marsyas affords ample evidence for judgment.

No less successful was Puget in the solution of purely artistic problems. He understood how to order the elements of representation so that, independent of meaning, they please the eye. With masterly assurance he endowed his sculpture with that formal beauty which is never absent from any great work of art. His compositions abound in astonishing rhythms, in daring oppositions of movement, and subtle balances of forms. His style is in perfect accord with the turbulence of his spirit. The pose of the Marsyas is novel and expressive. The sculpture is designed to be seen from the front or sides, but not from the back; very probably it stood in a niche.

The statue is neither signed nor recorded but on the evidence of style may assuredly be attributed to Puget. The sculptor perhaps had this work in memory when at the height of his fame he wrote to Louvois, who had succeeded Colbert, describing the sculptures he wished to execute for the decoration of Versailles: "I am also meditating a group of Apollo flaying Marsyas, in order to represent a kind of anatomy; a thing highly appreciated among sculptors and painters." The date of the Marsyas may be placed fairly early in Puget's career; probably about 1659, when he was working under the patronage of Claude Girardin for his château of Vaudreuil in Normandy, or perhaps somewhat later, during his Genoese period, 1660-1667.

In concluding, it may be noted that Puget, who was born in 1620 and died in 1694, was painter and architect as well as sculptor. His works in sculpture—and it is upon these that his fame rests—are not numerous, and they are mostly treasured in public collections or churches. It is consequently a matter of congratulation

that the Museum has been able to acquire so typical a work of this great master who profoundly influenced the course of French art.
J. B.

RUGS ON EXHIBITION

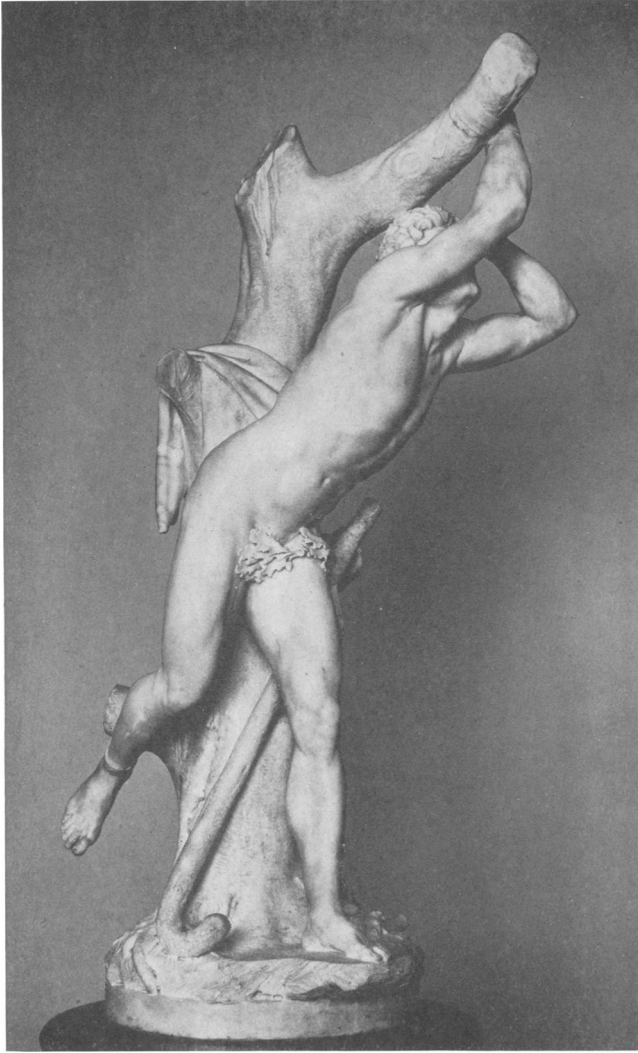
THE rearrangement of the rug gallery has made it possible to assemble some twenty representative examples of Near Eastern and Indian fabrics of unusual beauty and interest.

Foremost among these, hanging on the wall at the right as one enters, is the superb tree carpet of the Williams Collection. This, with its stately cypresses delicately screened by blossoming fruit trees, stands as a monument to the poet-weavers who dwelt among the hilly slopes that border the western shore of the Caspian in the early days when leisurely caravans, undisturbed by the rush of modern commercialism, wended their way westward from the Orient. A knowledge of the topography of Persia and the adjacent territory is helpful in determining the provenance of rugs. One can readily understand that an artist, to produce a fabric replete with flora, could not have dwelt in the arid waste of Central Persia or in the rocky steppes bordering the frontier of Central Asia on the north. Just as the poets, centuries before, impelled by the beauty of their surroundings, immortalized their country in lyrics read by all succeeding generations, so the patient weavers, influenced by the same natural setting, bequeathed to us a wealth of imaginative beauty in this carpet, imperial in the dignity of its composition and exquisitely refined in its color.

This carpet, which is lent by C. F. Williams,¹ was in the Munich Exhibition of Mussulman Art in 1910, and is attributed by Martin to the beginning of the fifteenth century—about 1400,² toward the close of the Timurid period; a period that reflects the artistic attainments of great monarchs

¹From the Joseph Lees Williams Memorial Collection.

²Similar trees are found in a Mongolian manuscript of the Musée des Arts décoratifs, dated 1396.



MARSHYAS BY PIERRE PUGET